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MOTHER IS HOW I GOT DOWN PAT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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ABSTRACT

This essay gathers concepts of matriarchal studies, theatre and hospitality in thinking beyond the contemporary venue of painting. Recognizing the limits of fine arts, as it is today, a product of a patriarchal, capitalistic societal structure, in its service to an inclusive, public sphere, my work is insistent on the value of installation. Accessibility to space (the art space), language, and the right to politics are goals inspiring the evolved features in my studio practice. The use of word is central in my study of our human behaviors as they can be best modeled according to the appreciation of mother(ing). Reflecting my personal background my image making considers the black heroin as a viable leader in the manifestation of this new calibration. This practice conflating the efforts of diverse media of the plastic arts is refreshing in arts return to reflect and serve community.

WHERE I'M FROM

My affinity with New York city had been tied to a fascination of Hip Hop and Rap music which bolstered my understanding of the environment as part of my upbringing. I was born in Far Rockaway Queens and my family was situated in East New York, Brooklyn. It was never my ambition to become a rap artist, but I respected the craft because of the passionate and energetic accounts of stories so close to home there was no question of fact or fiction. The cadence on a song, like the meter of a poem written during the Harlem renaissance, or the melody of a gospel sung in stride for civil rights, inspired the morale necessary to grapple with or attain the ideas shared through words.

(...) life stories told through rap
 Niggas acting like I sold you crack
 Like I told you sell drugs; no, Hov did that
 So hopefully you won't have to go through that
 I was raised in the projects, roaches and rats
 Smokers out back sellin' their mama's sofa
 Lookouts on the corner focused on the ave
 Ladies in the window, focused on the kinfolk
 Me under a lamppost, why I got my hand closed?
 Crack's in my palm, watching the long arm of the law
¹So you know I seen it all before
 I've seen Hoop Dreams deflate like a true fiend's weight ¹

As this country validated the man as the dominant figure in the family, the savage leader of savages, the black man was strategically vilified, one of the strategies of a variety for the dismantling of black family and any chances at prosperity. Men were consistently

¹ Jay-Z, "Izzo (H.O.V.A.)," May 2001, track 3 on *The Blueprint*, Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings, August 2001, compact disc.

targeted in racist killings, and otherwise criminalized by white guile. Still, in the 2000s the mayor of New York signed legislation in contribution to the flourishing age of mass incarceration.

I was raised here in the 90's. I am fortunate my beloved father has emerged from this life after substantial periods of my life incarcerated; his best friends, my uncles were killed. The youngest boy, I was sheltered from this trajectory.

Our thirteen year old son represents as much hope for our future world as does my fifteen year old daughter and we are not willing to abandon him to the killing streets of New York City.²



Discipline 400g Ivory Black, Pigmented Gypsum, 10"x10"x8", 2019.

² Audre Lorde, "Man Child," in *Sister Outsider*, Crossing Press, 2007, 77-78.



Mourn 550g Burnt Sienna 80g Venetian Red, Pigmented Gypsum, 2019.

I was raised by my mother, her mother, sister, niece, cousins and aunts. Each individual sister does not necessarily have biological children, but together they are all “mothers” of any children that any of the women have.³ My mother wasn’t a single mother until we moved to Baltimore, Maryland where I would finish grade school. When I introduce the tenets of my work belonging to womanist and matriarchal studies, it is in ode to the diverse and essential presence of these black heroines from these communities.⁴

³ Heide Göttner-Abendroth, “The Deep Structure Of Matriarchal Society.” in *Societies of Peace: Matriarchies Past, Present and Future* (Toronto, Canada: Inanna Publications 2009), 22-23.

⁴ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), xi.



Renée Cox, "Yo Mama," Gelatin silver print, 85"x49". 1993.

In the way Alice Walker challenges language according to her lived accounts of her mothers' experience, I admit my 2nd person perspective as I honor the lessons of mother. It is also undeniable, that as woman is origin, any learned behaviors already implicate the departure from mother and her presence. Before I introduce the practice of language in my work I now submit the arc of words I have prescribed in analysis of human behavior, and interaction. These words are predominantly transitive action words in lieu of the intimacy implied through interpersonal relationships:

Branch, Split, Adopt, Chaperone, Depend, Discipline/ Punish/ Incriminate, Branch (again), Mourn, Estrange, Hoist, Satisfy, Hoist, Tolerate, Expose, House, Defy, Inspire.



Tolerate 600g yellow ochre, 90g cadmium yellow, Pigmented Gypsum on Wooden furniture, 13"x10"x5", 2019.



Tolerate sketch, Charcoal on newsprint, 18"x24", 2019

Drawing geometric figures arose from forms I was using as compositional anchors in previous paintings. So, my fascination in architecture entered my work through the form of drawing. Almost as immediate as the gestural lines to describe the geometric interpretations were on the newsprint, so was the word of assured interest. The inquiry was in response to quotidian routines and customs, often outside of my own routine, of significant, personal relatability. Scenarios then posited for my analysis required the scrutiny of just why these dynamics are to be staged for reflection. To name the dynamic of the phenomenon as I have come to understand it isn't to declare it absolute. In an interview with Tyler Greene, artist Bethany Collins mentions a text by E.D Hirsch:

"Cultural Literacy: Things Every American Should Know," as testimony to the omnipresence of a selfish national regime which is exclusive and oppressive of many communities. It "includes an index of 5000 things if we all know them we will feel like we

belong together.”⁵ Well that is a lost cause considering the prejudice foundation this country valorized or persisted at for a lopsided glory. So, the word would move around the form or populate the page as synonym, corrections or strikethroughs. The word became beloved and coveted.

The Housing Projects of New York city, were apartments within large developments of tall brick buildings for low income families. The cycle of days were exuberant from the child’s perspective. There were plenty of trials, failures, support, doubt, and accountability part of a micro government that children establish. Actually some were less fortunate than others. Eventually dynamics shifted toward responsibility, confusion, isolation, vulnerability, hazard and more accountability. This energetic environment I describe is after the confluence of black migrating families to northern and midwestern cities like New York.

These cities of the same faulty nation, led by the same elitist class, while emblematic of the new nation’s prosperity, were constructed of unfair regulation to exclude those which whiteness had previously identified as lesser humans, in a cunning guise. Campaigns of terror, white collar tactics and propaganda led by the democrats of the south, did more than nudge the newly dignified black folk, so populous in the south, to move northward. This new playing field of inflated population and ambition was a haven for a festering animosity. New York was not exempt of the travesties committed against humanity in this country. This cultural, commercial, and financial metropolitan of the world transpires through an industrial revolution particular to the United States and in large to the perversion of a global patriarchy.

⁵ Bethany Collins, “NO. 435: JACOB LAWRENCE, BETHANY COLLINS,” interview by Tyler Greene, *Modern Art Notes Podcast*, March 5, 2020, audio, 49:55, <https://manpodcast.com/portfolio/no-435-jacob-lawrence-bethany-collins/>.

In reconsidering the form of my work I prioritize my audience. The family that raised me does not report to art as essential. Art is the way I contribute to the society I belong to and the care for the wellbeing of my family and those communities first. Mural work is a contemporary example of “art” afforded by the contemporary state for the public. This is imagery a public can truly access, and it belongs to them to live with. These circumstances breed enthusiasm. If I would persist to paint, where should my paintings exist to challenge standards of access.

My exhibitions include space making through the construction of architectural fixtures, props and poetic media that together inspire a choreography for any guest about the space between painting and sculpture. Architectural fixtures adapt the space my work is to convert. In endorsement of the art space I assume responsibility for its activation. I assume the position of host.

GET DOWN PAT

“I’ve got it down pat,” today a bit out of date, is an idiom I have known to exclaim an accomplished readiness or preparedness. This statement is offered in assuring someone who cares for you like a neighbor, partner, friend or supervisor. “Get Down Pat,” is the name of the installation, exhibiting the body of work in culmination of my graduate studies in the Painting and Printmaking department at Virginia Commonwealth University.

With this body of work, “Get Down Pat” prioritizes colloquially understood etiquette and behaviors recognized by the community I represent above with regards to preparedness necessary in facing systems of adversity. Consider the goals of a support system for a burgeoning adolescent and adult of the black community in the United States of America. The coincidence which delivered me to study the terms of action I elect to be reconsidered, is the posit from which I deduce the title for the play. The various juxtaposed art objects in my installations inform the stage and thus invite the audience to participate in the interrogation of language as it belongs to them.

This exhibition begins as you enter the Anderson Gallery, an old, large Carriage house, in which inside I take the responsibility to remodel to accommodate my actors to their effect. This writing will introduce the thinking behind each of the words tried in the body of work, Harbor, Wean, and Manifest.

THE ILLNESS

I will proceed to reference patriarchy, already well established, as it kidnapped its star project, the supposed land of liberty and freedom, our now beloved United States.

Within its rigor is the implied festering of racism, and dually sexism. By the dehumanizing of the human of black and colorful skin we arrive with the unrivaled mission of the transatlantic slave trade, as it was centered beyond class distinction, but now also, a psychological construct imposed on the subjects of whiteness. This meant centuries of toil to remain a superficially esteemed race, a species of its own with elevated rights. To sustain a false sense of enlightenment, co-opting a religious mandate to skew the morality of an evil, the white European and New American had to write law, rules, regulation, and constitution, that would define a Nation and land as their own.

As slavery was abolished, the social, economic and political systems required revision, and this past coveted property became sure opposition, disgusting and threatening in its potential rise to humanity. As defiance and perseverance wrangled little leverage at a time, the evil white man was fixed to his mentality ridden of insecurity, greed, and hate. The vast lands of the south, geographically central to the slave industry, were most populous of black families. God forbid the circumstantial promise of 40 acres and a mule was delivered to the black population who had been tilling these lands for free the preceding centuries. How they would sustain their newly constituted lives was

unsupported by the nation that would now decide to include them. Would they truly be granted the opportunity to develop a livelihood, or participate in this so-called nation? These populations subject to citizenship must be allowed to define the infrastructure that governs the system they have always energized. Passed in 1870, the 15th amendment denotes the illegality of voting discrimination in regards to man. Soon after, a gesture disregarded by the enacting of Jim Crow laws, a racist, segregationist set of amendments to assure the opportunity to exclude the newly freed black persons from socio-political participation, and bolster excuses and exceptions to benefit the white family. For example, literacy tests were implemented to slim the black majority from voting, and the Grandfather Clause to excuse the illiterate white population. The great written law is riddled with deceitful syntax and rewritten to maintain privilege for the self reverential oppressors. Still no woman could vote, and sure enough, suppression of the black vote persisted at large well through the sixties a century later. In the supreme court now, southern law makers return trials to the courts to retry and reapply their oppressive grip, in under the name of the good lord, over the rights of women. She is a second-class citizen, even to her own body.

A citizen is a political body, which means, they are granted the agency to participate in the matters defining their livelihood and public existence. The implementation of variable media output, in my installations, indebted to a common conversation is to tease the right and duty to interrogation within my audience, and to encourage another public culture in which suffering unexpected violence and loss and reactive aggression

are not accepted as the norm of political life.⁶ All women were fucked, raped, lied to, and controlled, but when the black woman was involved, it was a sin, secret or business. The behavior demonstrated by the white man toward the black woman was with racist and sexist conviction. Though the black woman was not woman at all, rather implicit in the noble white man's bestiality fetish, the fertile demon, and her further savage counterpart of black man were fantastic livestock for the perpetuation of their undeserved wealth. This capitalist mentality, part and parcel with the egotistical patriarchy leading the global West, and far beyond today, maintained wicked disregard for the other. In turn it is the gross wealth disparity, insufficient health care system, and impending doom of our planet serving the perpetually overworked, expendable, abused, and disrespected citizen. I was tempted to put working class citizen, and this term in itself suggest, societal inequality, the failed ideology of patriarchy.

Every morning, rain or shine, groups of women with brown paper bags or cheap suitcases stand on streetcorners in the Bronx and Brooklyn waiting for a chance to get some work.... Once hired on the "slave market," the women often find after a day's back-breaking toil, that they worked longer than was arranged, got less than was promised, were forced to accept clothing instead of cash and were exploited beyond human endurance. Only the urgent need for money makes them submit to this routine daily.⁷

⁶ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers Of Mourning And Violence* (New York: Verso Books): xiv.

⁷ Angela Davis, "The Meaning Of Emancipation According To Black Women" in *Women, race & class*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 64.

I look forward to the newly envisioned concept of market and economy as the turn in leadership is increasingly defined by the black woman. The black woman has always defied the inhumane conditions put before her. The black woman has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate the capacity to care beyond any other. Caring is hard work and even harder when she has consistently been opposed and undermined because she is Jezebel and Mammy, prostitute and female eunuch, the two-in-one,” eloquently put by Lorraine O’Grady as she explicates the error in Western canon representation and disseminated symbology of the black women.⁸



Defy 6, Oil on Panel, 45"x33"x2.5", 2020

⁸ Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity*,” *The Feminism and Cultural Reader*, Routledge. 1994.

WEAN, RETURN OF THE MATRIARCH



Wean, Oil on Panel, 20"x32"x2.5", 2020

Our actions should aspire to lessons learned by the graces of womanhood, and when our women are exhausted they should be supported then too. This painting is installed at a height for the viewer to assume the position of the lending hand, take a seat, be the shoulder to be leaned upon. The devastating, and stigmatized cigarette is an instrument for relief globally, beyond community boundaries. The urge this woman toils with may be distracted by the exhale of a cigarette; be a neighbor and share this moment. Like the support you were accustomed to receiving, bad habits too require aid in weaning. These

compositions derived of momentary scenes in the long narrative format of a film are developed to foster a slowness in indulging the dynamics of the action at play. Also, the painting of filmic stills lends the painting itself, to a comparative study about the affect each media can impart.

Wean, in the second passage way

To reference a scene from Barry Jenkins' "Moonlight," is not simply in celebration of the beautiful cinematography accomplished, it is the appropriation of a character relationship. This movie takes place in a black community in South Florida, yet I relate to the son reporting to the care of his mother who neglected him because of the drugs she had become addicted to. This artist shared a full narrative, but this moment in particular was to be reiterated as I could describe this dynamic with Wean.

I recognize the urgency engaged by the male genus to dominate as a classification of its self-acknowledged inferiority as it does not possess the capacity to bear life itself. Whether matriarchy is deciphered as the leadership of mother, or mother of beginnings or origin, this concept is morally viable. It is in the domineering, forceful hands, physically endowed power of the male sex which would contest the importance and honor of inherited matriarchal aspects. It is domination which seeks to eliminate or subordinate all else which can contribute to the balance of living together.

The dynamic is also obvious in the existing nature of the art industry. The art industry as it exists today is a popular branch of capitalism. The voices and participants of this industry remain vulnerable to the violence of the market. These conditions about the field suspend, jeopardize and hinder the availability for communities to thoroughly indulge expressive work, access the histories and sciences, and provide an education through and about art. This is irresponsible management of a fruit innate in human life.

The United States' policies for environmental sustenance and protection also exemplify exploitative and immoderate conduct.

The populations who are to suffer first are naturally the communities most vulnerable already subject to the inequalities of this global, patriarchal hegemony. Every inhabitant who belongs to a community belongs also to the earth and this implies a commitment not only to every other inhabitant of that earth but, we can surely add, to sustaining the earth itself.⁹ The concept of man versus nature has never been so revelatory of human arrogance. We other the very mouths that provide us life and sustain us of nourishment. In fact, the process of the socialization of children requires that the other, the different, who is a small baby, be respected for her or his diversity and brought up to the same level as the mother. The domination of children, like the domination of adults, is part of the patriarchal, not matriarchal.¹⁰

⁹ Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation.," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012) (May 2020): 144

¹⁰ Genevieve Vaughn, "Matriarchy and the Gift Economy." in *Societies of Peace: Matriarchies Past, Present and Future* (Toronto, Canada: Inanna Publications 2009), 46.

Ma·ter /'mādər/ (n.)(*latin*) [f.]

1. Mother
2. Origin, Source

Materia, Materiae (n.)(*latin*) [f.]

1. Heartwood
2. Timber
3. Substance
4. Woody branch, growth, part of tree

Matter /'ma-dər/ (n.) (*english*)

1. A physical substance; as distinct from mind and spirit
2. An affair or situation under construction, a topic

An etymological chart of the word Mater, root of Mother, Material, and Matter.
Exploring the etymology of word, one is enabled to decipher the cultural values of a society which influence the word development within the language. Sample definitions sourced from Dictionary by Merriam-Webster and Oxford English Dictionary.

My arrival to the casting of pigmented forms is two or three fold. As I required more flexibility in my painting medium regarding scale of imagery, in accordance with venue, I moved away from a quick drying, rigid, plastic medium, characteristic of gouache. In deliberation of the next medium to invest in, I considered my ability to produce this medium and measure its expense. For the casting of the pigmented figurines, I calculate the mass of material I consume and display for public attention. The expense of a pigment correlates to the finiteness of a material, or the difficulty immanent of its processing. This transaction then forefronts a practice of humility.

I had been concerned of the image within the painting being not only relatable, but in a form, presentation and place which welcomes and reckons the agency of the audience. The combination of pigment and plaster, the original equation for my pigmented casts, is an ode to the art history of the public fresco. This node of production within my studio employs simple math and science, and through it I embody a responsibility and accountability which is very important as a producer.



Studio view of waste material (pigmented plaster in compostable bags) for Ma-ter 1 at 4WS, LA 2019

Stemming from the latin word Mater, this root word of mother extends onto an array of words including matter, matrix, Alma Mater, matrilineal and so much more; here I discuss it as root in the grand word matriarchy. The suffix -archy- better illuminated for me by Dr. Heide Goettner Abendroth is more than a ruling or governing structure, though it has been perverted and essentialized to mean such.¹¹ The greek word later interpreted as chief, ruler, or leader is already a derivative of the term denoting origin or beginning. Matriarchal societies are defined as such that women are centralized. They are not unequally privileged, but the women are given due respect and protection as they are central to procreation. To this point these communities and societies infrastructure reflect such centrality. The clan of women, the sisterhood that I likened to in understanding my upbringing, live together in close cooperation. The family structure is defined through a matrilineal blood line. They assign the offspring of the community in allegiance to the mother, the grandmother and her children. This would include a brother or uncle birthed of the mother's family. Economic behaviors, another grand distinction of the matriarchal society differ from the exchange-based market economy. A gift giving economy features the direct satisfaction of needs and creates solidarity and trust.

Wean (in vignette) in the first passageway

A bisected triangular prism of lead at the end of a countertop. At the other end of the countertop, a bowl awaiting your engagement with the box of cereal behind it. The countertop is blunt as you enter, mounted in the corner, a curve receives you to funnel toward the succeeding path. It is a soft steering, and light linoleum tile at the base of the vignette suggests this corridor is already plenty roomy for you to take your time. Don't

¹¹ Heide Göttner-Abendroth, "The Deep Structure Of Matriarchal Society." in *Societies of Peace: Matriarchies Past, Present and Future* (Toronto, Canada: Inanna Publications 2009), 17.

find it so odd to have a bowl of cereal here, or perhaps it will suit you better just on your way out.

Wean

A small cardboard box, like the fun size cereal boxes you could get for school breakfast, is sitting behind the bowl of cereal. The box in a softened, saturated orange, with white lettering slightly skewed upward reads WEAN. Perhaps this form relies on the marketing strategy of store brand advertisements. Have you ever seen a box of WHEATIES? This cereal a box is a serving for one. Quite the contrary to “a family size” box, this is for the convenience of taking along with you as you must leave your home.

Judith Butler addressing the ethics of cohabitation quotes Levinas, ‘Reciprocity cannot be the basis of ethics,’ and continues “Egoism is the defeat of ethics itself.”¹²

The aspects about matriarchal teachings including other-orientation, communal efforts through solidarity and trust, respect for mother, moderate indulgence and humble appreciation of the providing earth are tenets I attempt to translate in my art practice. I subscribe to womanism as a colloquial iteration of these universal ideals. Womanism, proposed by Alice Walker, defines the feminine on the relatable terms of an embodied or revered black womanhood. A word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: ‘You’re acting womanish!’¹³ If my work can embody the womanish, it will be for the better. I need not always depict the woman in my work to proceed with my valorizing of a new, socio-political calibration in this regard. In fact, the figurative imagery in “Get Down Pat”

¹² Judith Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation.,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012) (May 2020): 141

¹³ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), xi.

predominantly depicts male figures. Matriarchal societies and Womanism are inclusive and appreciate male as fellow human being.

HARBOR

Now this feels like a living room, or convenient space to congregate, though along the perimeter, I spy various engagements of varying situations. Intimate moments indeed, there are two panels closely caddy cornered from one another, I meet neither set of eyes. What could they possibly be speaking of I wonder, but to their confidence I leave them.

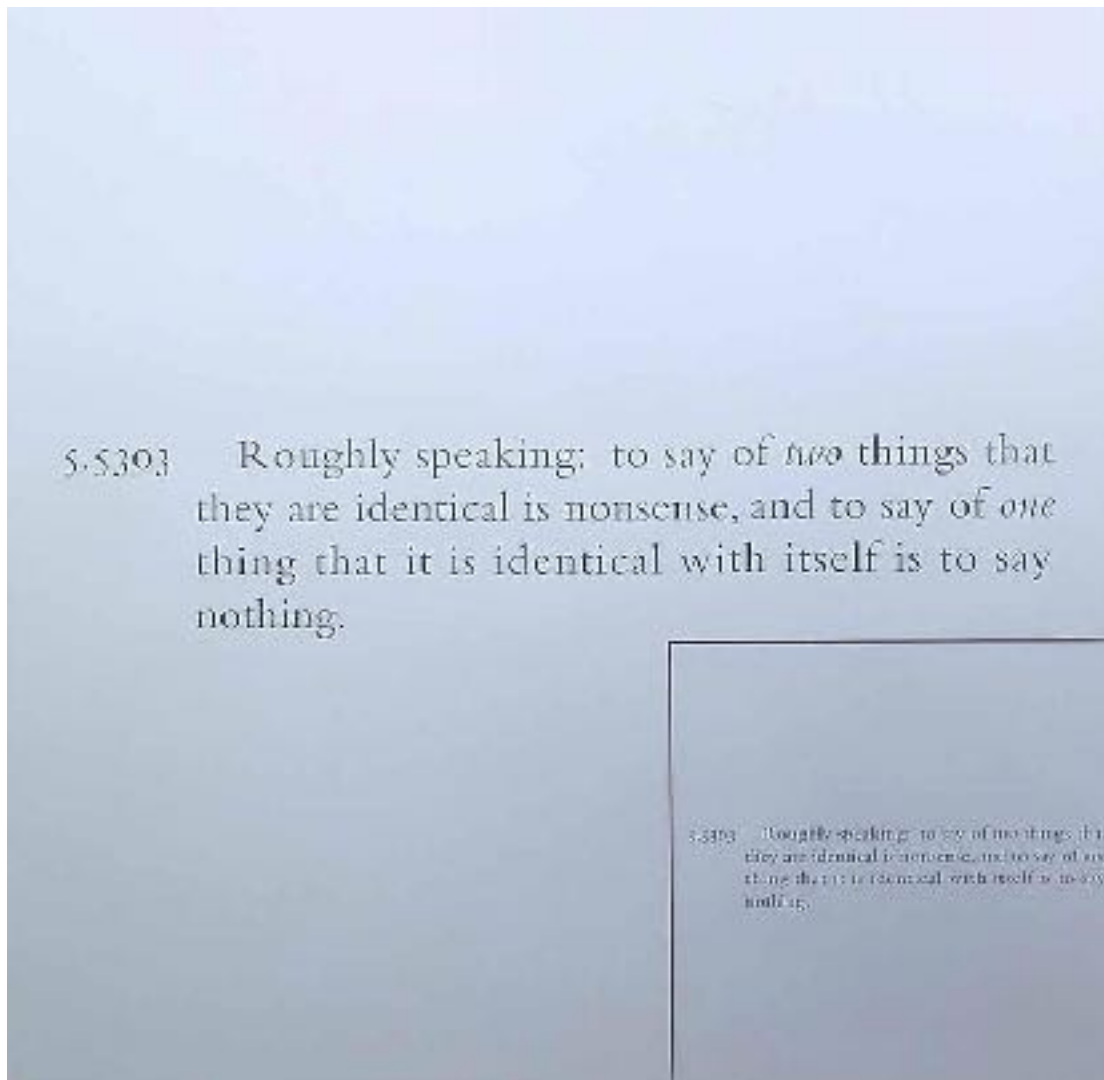
Harbor (Diptych) in the second passage way:

This diptych situates two figures into a corner, or how I'd like to introduce it here, two converging planes. The bodies of each of these figures are singularly composed from chest up, a bit more than a bust in each case. Intention installs the two perpendicular to each other enacting a crossroads the gestures they each contribute to this pictorial interaction. Their background is subdued, yet rich, dark and blue. This treatment of their environment supports their implicit necessity to keep this information exclusive on the basis of their vulnerability otherwise. Neither of the figures look back at the viewer. They are preoccupied with the weight of the situation between themselves.

Harbor (Anatomized) in the second passage way— to the opposite corner:

I have previously noted my focus in language is invested in the adequacy of word describing an action or behavior. Complimentary to the political staging of the installation, this boat painting is mundane and odd in contrast to the warmth of the plausibly more personable figurative paintings furnishing the walls otherwise. Abstracted from a scene captured en plein air in the Marine harboring Hampton Roads, Virginia to explicate the aspects of harbor as I the site is committed to anchorage as haven for port dealings. The industry implied by gas tanks and lumber, the docked boats in or out of service, the aircraft carrier ship at the helm of the inlet to the port. The painting is grounded by the worked pier foregrounded to the water beyond. The boats are stationed around the implied open water ahead. Military maintenance, and protection of our land is the excuse. The two toned blue, is a blatant pun in dispute of the romanticized, classist

painting of boat in landscape. Rather its just a few clippings of stuff that secure our gates by sea.



'No Number Twice (+216, After Augustine's Confessions) III', 1991
 2 part work, silkscreen and aluminum
 48 x 48 inches
 19 1/4 x 19 1/4 inches



Harbor 2 (anatomized), Oil on Panel, 31"x35"x2.5", 2020

I arrived at Harbor after pondering the act of concealing within the boundaries of gossip and the etiquette constructed in its vain. Whether it be my mother or aunt, whom I would be so privileged to listen into or simply witness great deals of their business would insist that I not go on to share my account of their experiences. “You know how I am about my business,” implying “Don’t go telling my business.” Considering the unfortunate condition of needing to exclaim originality, in lieu of your otherwise lesser regarded circumstances where as an individual’s contribution deserved to be acknowledged. Egalitarian, respectful places, don’t oppress individuals and thus inclusion amongst families, neighbors and communities was more common and necessary. I can even entice the connotation of harboring a suspected criminal or providing a safe hold for someone under siege. Imagine a community at adversity with prejudiced authorities and thus contravene these biased missions skeptical of the consistent purveyance of white supremacy. Have you ever had to rely upon an organization because it seemed to be your best option, or had been denied other opportunities. Stigmas are elitist developments and impose debilitating pressures on fellow humans. Stigmas can be harmful delivering shame, perhaps void of compassion. Identifying the perspective of a fellow human in understanding your transactions and interactions is central to embodying a good neighborhood. Politics in the hood teach the complexities of the act of harboring.

The objects themselves are admittedly singular trials of expression. Community is predicated on the collection of acts we together appreciate. Politics assume the fluidity

of duty to action lubricated through discussion. Your citizenship exists according to your participation and like understanding of culture and custom. The venues from which I have gleaned the information, lessons, and support that I value today define the communities for whom I devote my commitment in my works' ambition. Innovations for the inclusivity and accessibility of the arts venue regards the power in newly encouraged agencies.

The recounting of moments and places are essential to my tool kit for analyzing habits. Reflection upon habit, learned behaviors, or routine implies there are situational reoccurrences of concern. This information is the demonstration of community values. The habit belongs to the individual according to the likeness of their past actions through their living of unique scenarios. The contextualizing elements that frame the living actor must also be addressed in order to appreciate their actions. In most cases I reference periods of and preceding my upbringing to affirm my understandings of contemporary happenstance I witness. In doing so, I address the system of values contextualizing my person today, and I can comprehend human variability be it in accordance with time or place. From the position of stranger or wanderer what more to do but develop an understanding of security, inclusivity and access.

Harbor (in vignette) in the third passageway

Between a wall and what was a bed, or at least an imprint in the carpet that eludes to such, a two tier corner shelving unit is reflective of the environment caddy corner to it. This fixture has a copper-toned mirrored finish. On the top shelf sits a small teddy bear, a bit dusty, behind a small bouquet of dried flowers. Just below on the first shelf, a deep, dark blue figurine about the height of a novel standing on its pages, with its binding

toward us and the contour of its open pages turned away, toward the shelf's mirrored corner.

Harbor (as Ephemera) in the third passageway

Well into the installation space, upon the ledge of the suggested dresser drawer which situates the sculptural heart of a manifest (in vignette), sits another drawer pulled open a touch. A blue matchbox with Harbor written upon it, also in blue. If you read the fine print, I may provide a sample definition or two. The match is much more than a party favor, its utility includes the lighting of a cigarette, a candle, incense, as lavatorial incense, or provide a handy light for illumination.

HOSPITALITY

The food industry, like the art scene, is exploitative of the communities who indulge the exchange of this essential commodity in accordance with the esteem of the market, criticism, and competition. Still, I speak from my experience as part of a community invested in the passionate stewardship of food and beverage, a giving forum of harvest, community and art. The caliber of fine dining institutions I understand demands the sincerity of its ambassadors.

The illnesses of this industry includes the capitalist necessity of an endless supply, though in contemporary the reward of more sustainable practices, delivering you better food, increases the value of the product. Within the hierarchy of positions, the stewardship, ambassador to the esteemed food, still carries the demeaned stigma associated with the status of a house worker.

I acknowledge my history as a Black American as I profess the merit in the breadth of skills developed this range of humble, and nonsensically humiliated occupations.

I reintroduce a previously cited argument in regards to the perseverance of the black woman:

household work is considered degrading because it has been disproportionately performed by Black women, who in turn are viewed as “inept” and “promiscuous.” But their ostensible ineptness and promiscuity are myths which are repeatedly confirmed by the degrading work they are compelled to do. As W. E. B. DuBois said, any white man of

“decency” would certainly cut his daughter’s throat before he permitted her to accept domestic employment.¹⁴

The new guard of service industry advances toward a sustained ambition to maintain ethically sourced product and a strong-willed front of the house team to demonstrate and affect a sincere regard for hospitality. This ideology is dire to such a vital craft and industry.

This looks like *Bad Saint*, a small restaurant in Washington DC. The Co-owner, leader and Master of Ceremonies is a woman name Genevieve Villamora. Her front of the house staff, rotate leadership positions aside her throughout each nights’ service 8 hour choreographed routine, inspirational to their guest by their bold, warm, generous, and efficient care taking. The 2019 James Beard Mid Atlantic Best Chef is as family to Genevieve as she is a mentor to him. Dishwashers, chefs, servers and owners alike eat together, celebrate birthdays together, and cry together. Gifting the staff home-baked pies, with invitations to family events, letters and so much more, guest return again and again to return the generosity. The former stranger assumes Bad Saint as familiar and familial. I am inspired by and reflect on the dynamics about environments like this.

¹⁴ Angela Davis references Gerda Lerner Angela Davis, “The Meaning Of Emancipation According To Black Women” in *Women, race & class*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 63



Installation view Sunday School in the Community Room, Defy 3 (anatomized), Oil on Panel
30"x24"x1.5", 2019

These paintings are described as anatomized. This word stemming from the root of anatomy, explicates my decision as author to reference the models depicted as they embody the action at play. This form of abstraction may tease the phenomenon of ideas developed of black culture, then so overly consumed, needing to be explained to the dominant white class. For black artist of the civil rights movement abstraction was often granted as a language belonging to the white boys. These excerpted gestures exist within generous voids of paint. They also find themselves amongst the language of collage or scrapbooking. These installations conflate the expectation of figurative painting tasked with the duty of explaining the black political experience and the necessary access to the poetics that can be liberating through the form of abstraction as found in my sculptural vignettes.

My assertion of hospitality in theory is not defined by the important tenets of the more colloquial understanding of hospitality, rather I locate and depart from the theory of Jacques Derrida's *Of Hospitality*.

Identifying with the foreigner, stranger, wanderer—other or outsider—he distinguishes the risks and implications in the privileged position of host. Conditional hospitality is refuted in my practice as is the elitist positioning understood modernism, minimalisms, and expressionisms of the midcentury United States' white male championed art word. This hospitality is not offered to an anonymous new arrival and someone who has neither name, nor patronym, nor family, nor social status, and who is therefore treated not as a foreigner but as another barbarian.¹⁵ Not dissimilar to the conventions about elitist establishment ostracizing, segregating and oppressing communities deprived of sufficient resources, the already disfranchised are kept at bay. The contractual

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, in *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (California: Stanford Press, 2000), 25.

understanding here includes a reciprocated action, thus the stranger must be able to reciprocate, and ready to assume debt. This is obviously counterproductive.

I take it for granted my audience will not always subscribe to the same language as I, thus I express word in various iterations. If the painter must retry their fixated endeavor each painting, I encourage my viewers interrogation, so I can maintain through new learning and exchanged perspective. My installation becomes the frame or witness with each turn to an encounter between viewer and an individual art object as a new host guest relationship. If language is a primary assessment of belonging, then less interrogate language. If my audience cannot recognize their agency in politics then my work cannot be a part of the discourse which contributes to the development and sustenance of community.



Sketch for Wean in Vignette, Charcoal on Newsprint, 18"x24", 2020

The stranger, unknown and foreign to this new space will enliven the establishment and will question that which is already in position. If that which is already in position is current and healthy it will be able to share and demonstrate well-being. If there is an existing fault or shortcomings about the place of the host may it be revealed to the host, inspiring new development or contributing to ever necessary management. It's this model in which we build bridges with our neighbors, diversifying space from which thought may propagate and contribute to an inclusive, egalitarian society.

Unconditional hospitality cannot assume your allegiance. Ever too familiar for communities under the state of precariousness, the host, state, the individual in position must always aim to exercise an absolute hospitality. The position of host is not fixed. Language is neither fixed.

Human habits are best described as they define politics. We rely on the outside to register our internal existence. The humility in my practice is thus far sustained through my trials of individual words, and the limited accounts available to mediate upon at a time. We must acknowledge our share implication as neighboring beings in our cities, countries, on this earth, and within our homes too. In my position delivering an art exhibition, I am limited to confident reflection according to my limited proximity to the communities of which I participate in.

MANIFEST

Manifest (anatomized)

The United States subjects the white man as the rightful owner of the great land, and this very ownership is money and power. The devious missions bolstered throughout this history is implicit in the antagonizing of the black man, whom became reflective of this dirty plot. I situate my connotation of manifest with the US doctrine of Manifest Destiny over the land far more grand beyond the original thirteen colonies. The painted void is drying grass patch or money green. In order to achieve and acquire, the black man was of course resourceful, innovative, and destined. This painting describes negotiation, endowment, burden, struggle and valor. To obtain better, the available and cyclical system alluded too through posturing within this landscape is a well intentioned paradox. Here I appreciate this perspective which may otherwise be disgusting in its macho, greedy, destructive nature. It is at the fault of these systems, that the glory of womanhood arises with an unmatched hardiness.

Manifest 2

Water is a beautiful symbol for life and also the neglect we demonstrate toward all whom depend upon it. Is the greatness of this planet, the elements of nature that we depend upon not apparent. This black child of a town so close to water may be experiencing a leisurely swim for the first time. What sort of circumstances has hindered the opportunity to this experience or right to this healthy indulgence of water. Is he prepared to face this maritime.



Manifest sketch, Charcoal on Newsprint, 18"x24", 2018. Dear beloved rap artist Stack Bundles', "Only light-skinned nigga with a chip on his shoulder" rap line was impetus to this drawing. "Jason Williams (feat RRS)" Show and Prove Mixtape. Eventually, I was able to summarize this concern to the burden of inheriting a position or tasks to bring something to fruition.

Manifest (in vignette)

Against the wall, with in the wall we approach a dresser, a drawer, open. The top drawer, to the right, closer to the passage way is more than cracked open. You can look right into this drawer, not quite full of socks, underwear, nor linen. Just a sheet or two, and polished weight of iron just atop it. This twisted metal is handheld size, but perhaps too heavy to handle, or lift with ease.

Manifest (as ephemera)

Under an excerpt of a public bench jutting of the wall in the second passage there sits a circular or local newspaper, seemingly neglected and probably out of circulation now. Composed to be available to the viewers' notice the headers and subheads read Manifest. To jump into the news, to be skeptical of, thorough in your read, steadfast in your participation is what it may take to regulate agency. I think of coupons and classifieds, support that we broadcast for one another.

DRAMA KING

My agenda includes disrupting the expected setting of the fine arts venue. Through installation, an extension of the postmodernist project, my painting practice has expanded, now with a vetting for companion media. Sculpture, a rivaling vein within the plastic arts, is installed in tandem with paintings, as well as word, in support of the expressive goals toward communicating with the audience. Here I challenge the violence demonstrated in the art space, the pervasion of hierarchical definitions of expression. Implementing this strategy is a genuine result of my artistic idiosyncrasies. The plasma in between these vital objects of art within an art space may be the novel liaison making space for a new sort of spectatorship. This is the initiative behind my installation work. It is important to resituate learning and thinking through the expressive modalities without denying the already established concept of a gallery or museum as a place to do it.

The pristine white cube is alienating. This neutral space is instituted to allow for the clear mind necessary to access the genius of the art object in front of you. This prerequisite can be prestigious and exclusionary. Providing personable contextualizing may offer a conversational environment right where you stand. The viewer need not be silent like the blank walls the art objects are prescribed to exist upon. I do not deny the use of the white cube as appropriate for the moment of interaction between art object, its situation amongst architecture, and viewer. Architecture is the most psychological of

the arts. It defines the approach to work and frames your response to the kinds of meanings you find in it.¹⁶ The human mind will rely on their past experiences to address the visual encounter prompted to encounter. Giving the pretext of underfunded schools serving black and brown constituency, my inspiration for my family and communities' inclusion grapples with my distancing fascination with academic vigor, particularly as a nerdy art geek. Suggestive of an intellectual inequality in the late 20th century, Jacques Ranciere asks his reader to interrogate against who's background we have become used to judging the political implication of the theatrical spectacle.¹⁷ It is my responsibility to assure my communities, unfamiliar to such privileged or exclusive institutions, identify this is their conversation. It was necessary to reconstruct the network of presuppositions that place the question of the spectator at the heart of the discussion of the relation between art and politics.¹⁸ The artist as host, poses the question in the form of an exhibition; they pronounce their language and a manner of address.

My installations in essence are comparable to the affect of theatre, thus I utilize the jargon of theatre. Each painting installation is comprised of multiple troupes. A troupe is a group of artists performing in dance or theatre. The performers are the paintings and sculptures working together in scrutiny of the shared title of the individual art objects. Also identifying the contemporary pertinence of installation today, Joseph Kosuth lectures, "the play itself, a connecting and disrupted narrative of discourse, of historical

¹⁶ Joseph Kosuth. 2018 James T. Demetrian Lecture, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, April 26, 2018.

¹⁷ Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans: Gregory Elliot (London: Verso Books)

¹⁸ Ibid

and cultural references, makes formal associations with both art and non art sources and contains both social and political meaning in a cultural view.”¹⁹

Text Ephemera

Like the installation itself, there must be moments where the artist forfeits their agent projection. I had come to recognize that I must recognize language and the word as of course central to politics, and very much for my work as well. Form will now become media as I introduce objects delivering simple word explicitly upon non-art referencing, cultural paraphernalia. On these objects the presence of word is not abnormal. The language is accommodated by strategies of publicity or advertisement and the audience is familiar with an agency they maintain in such public happenstance.

The Platonic stage is a public sphere of activity, though too criticized for its dual purpose in providing venue to fantasy. Likened to writing in this regard, these forms of art embody the power of democracy as in “disturbance to the clear partitions of identities, activities and spaces.”²⁰ There is a privileged context here which is no longer granted—the absence of a gross an elitist nation with such global influence.

In response to the politics of a Nationalist Germany in the early 20th century Bertolt Brecht rose out of a necessary shift out of a dramatic Expressionist theatre. As the theatre became more technologically advanced and emotionally immersive, pitting you as one with the characters, he sought an urgency to transform the theatre into a central rallying-point like sport venue for current politics.²¹ Within the play the politics are

¹⁹ Joseph Kosuth. 2018 James T. Demetrian Lecture, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, April 26, 2018.

²⁰ Jacques Ranciere, *The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans: Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum Books)

²¹ John Willet, “Theatrical Practice,” in *Theatre of Bertolt Brecht* (London: Eyre Methuen 1977)

explicit, evading implications, set drawings, and narrative may be introduced through projection. Actors, some time employed as multiple characters, may detail their action before delivery.

Various techniques used in his plays produced a distance between the audience and the narrative guiding the plot indicative of Brecht's adamancy to invite the audience into critical thought about their life be it implicit in current politics. Epic was a term applied to theatre in dismissal of fantastical or emotionally captivating performance to rather inspire and stir the minds of its audience as societal participants. Democracy is a false pretense of government in the global west and art must assume the role in demonstrating the supposed viability of egalitarian right to participation. The structure of art must be made available to the emancipated spectator. A venue for equalizing forms of expression which accommodate an audience belonging to the reality of unequal support and access to education, thus an intellectual inequality.

Upon exit, shall the audience ask themselves, was that for me. Not the ideas about transaction near or far, or the play on words performed by black and colorful actors, nor the demonstration of being considerate and taking care, but the bowl of cereal you passed your way out. There may always be disparity in the connections available in my installations, but this is apart of the negotiation in life in route to learn and continually try to maintain. It is an active mission. Though it may be humble, maintenance is not a passive assignment. Maintenance does not deny incumbent change or evolution, so who do we owe our preparedness?

FOUR ARTISTS OF SIGNIFICANT PROWESS

Below I will introduce a few artist who's work is intended subvert limiting institutions within art. The artist demonstrate a regard for the agency of their viewer and the participants of their about their work.



Mickalene Thomas, Sandra-She's a Beauty Standing, 2012

Mickalene Thomas

Attending to her coming of age needs asserting her own identity, Mickalene Thomas was also able to mend and fortify her relationship with her mother. Mickalene Thomas's mother has been a central muse in her work. In conversation with photography and the popular image of the black woman, her use of painting and collage has established a language of glamour and empowerment. The heavy use of textile is her assertion cultural perspective. The women that she depicts are from a personal archive of imagery she is developing to represent her communities. Mickalene Thomas also employs the stage, with a hospitable sense, in order to receive and provide comfort to sitters whom assume the position of representing these communities of Black Womanhood her work stands for. The stage has come to present beyond her tableaux and are now granted available to in the space of the viewing audience.

Ulla Von Brandenburg

Her film work demonstrated a focus into in routine and the ceremony later imbued onto her work through a consideration of stage and dance. Arriving of her figurative painting practice depicting character, in uniform or with prop of utility, she offers the accoutrement of the stage production with in the exhibition space. This confluence of expression through art objects may commence or culminate with a curtain to walk into or an orchestra-like staircase to accommodate the viewer to watch a film featuring the very staircase upon with they view from. Her work emboldened my inquiry of why the audiences presence must be so central to the work. Matriarchal art champions dance, and art forms which include the public, and a wholeness of participation. She considers stage and backstage. Her work operates between the poetics of movement to the didactics of tangible objects. Her paintings very fluid and immediate, focus on character. What and how this person is acting or positioned may precede why and who they are. The interconnected multiplex of artistic disciplines remain an inspiration to my aspiring convergence of media affect onto the audience.



Ulla Von Brandenburg, *It Has a Golden Sun and an Elderly Grey Moon*, Film, 2016



Exhibition view, Prix Marcel Duchamp, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2016

Adrian Piper

With regards to my concern about access and agency, Adrian Piper is a true model for why an artist may utilize multiple disciplines of expression including, writing or text, painting, sculpture, photography and performance. Piper is well regarded as a conceptual artist whose references are synthesized minimally to plainly confront the viewer as they face paintings of interracial marriage, given lessons on culturally relevant dances, or granted the gaze upon multicultural women protagonist coupled with elucidating captioning. Her socio-political based work is very dense and does not prioritize a particular medium to convey her ideas. My favorite strategy of hers operates through comparative iteration yielding multiple opportunities for her viewers to process complicated or convoluted discourse within a single exhibition.



Exhibition view, "Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Institutions, 1965-2016," MoMA 2018



Adrian Piper
Multichrome Mom and Dad,
Acrylic paint on canvas, 16 x 18 in
1966

Michelangelo Merisi da Carravaggio

The consideration of the animated figure is juxtaposed in the picture frame according to the suspended activation of the viewer. The early strategies employing the arrangement of still life as a prop shared by the painted figure and the shared space between the two and the viewer also compelled to appreciate this space as their own too. I look to Caravaggio for this sensitive awareness of figurative body in the composition as it intends to share and demonstrate for its audience. His use of chiaroscuro not only amplifies the naturalist effect of his figures and still lives, but it activates the background space anew. The bleak darkness in amidst these scenes take place, parallel to the ambiguity of the figures gaze and posture, invites the viewers imagination to enter and expound upon the contents and setting of the space. This high contrast between figurative and spatial also lends a clarity about action and scenario with in the paintings.



Carravaggio, The Calling of St. Matthew, Oil on Panel, 130"x127", Contarelli Chapel, Rome.

Closing Remarks:

Perhaps mother will remain as central in my work, as is language. Each aspect describes the rudiment of community. As you have never heard the term, mother tongue. Or for that matter, word to my mother, “you motherfucker” (not a good thing beyond the tired glorified bad boy,) or the motherland. So why don’t we take agency as we submit to language as laws govern us. Our neighbors near and far, peers and family members are equal and shall we mind our manners as we politic. And sure, nothing comes before our motherland, but no need to divide and deny our global connection, as this land and water which feed and stabilize one another constitute this earth to our sustenance and stability. We all support one another, so why don’t we retire our blinding arrogant ways and rise to the glory of a womanish humility. Unfortunately it has only been against adversity, we have come to know this humbling word.

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